

# An Awful Revenge: The Eastern Victors' Concentration Camps after World War II

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The eastern victors continued to operate many formerly German concentration camps after World War II. Additional camps to intern ethnic Germans were established in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia. The existence and operation of these postwar camps is a matter of major historical significance. While the population of the German concentration-camp system had grown to a record peak of 700,000 by the beginning of 1945, the number of Germans incarcerated across Europe in similar camps by the end of 1945 was possibly even higher. [\[1\]](#)

## Soviet-Run Camps

The German concentration camps at Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Mühlberg, Fürstenwalde, Liebe-Roze, Bautzen and other locations were taken over by the Russian Gulag Archipelago. The camp at Buchenwald, for example, was transformed into "Special Camp No. 2" and was operated by the Soviet Union until 1950. [\[2\]](#) Conditions at the camps under Soviet control were atrocious. The camps were labeled "special" because the Soviets insisted that the internees be cut off completely from the civilian population. [\[3\]](#) Even Gen. Merkulov, the Soviet official in charge of the concentration camps in Germany, acknowledged the severe lack of order and cleanliness, particularly at Buchenwald. [\[4\]](#)

One former inmate described his five years in the Soviet-run Buchenwald Camp:

*People were mere numbers. Their dignity was consciously trampled upon. They were starved without mercy and consumed by tuberculosis until they were skeletons. The annihilation process, which had been well tested over decades, was systematic. The cries and groans of those in pain still echo in my ears whenever the past comes back to me in sleepless nights. We had to watch helplessly as people perished according to plan—like creatures sacrificed to annihilation.*

*Many nameless people were caught up in the annihilation machinery of the NKVD after the collapse of 1945. They were herded together like cattle after the so-called liberation and vegetated in the many concentration camps. Many were systematically tortured to death. A memorial was built for the dead of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. A figure of death victims was chosen based on fantasy. Intentionally, only the dead of the 1937-1945 period were honored. Why is there no memorial honoring the dead of 1945 to 1950? Countless mass graves were dug around the camp in the postwar period. [\[5\]](#)*

While no one can know the exact number of inmates and deaths at Buchenwald, it is reasonably certain a higher percentage of inmates died under Soviet control than under German control. Viktor Suvorov estimates that 28,000 people were imprisoned by the Soviets at Buchenwald from 1945-1950, of whom 7,000 (25%) died. By comparison, he estimates that 250,000 people were imprisoned by the Germans at Buchenwald from 1937 to 1945. Of that number, Suvorov estimates that 50,000 (20%) died. The Soviet-run Buchenwald had a higher estimated death rate than the German-run Buchenwald. [\[6\]](#)

Suvorov's estimates of deaths at Soviet-run Buchenwald are probably understated. Some sources estimate that at least 13,000 and as many as 21,000 persons died in Soviet-run Buchenwald. [\[7\]](#) Also, a detailed June 1945 U.S. government report on German-run Buchenwald put the total deaths at a lower

number of 33,462, of whom more than 20,000 died in the final chaotic months of the war. These total deaths include at least 400 inmates killed in British bombing raids.<sup>[8]</sup> Thus, the death-rate percentage at the Soviet-run Buchenwald versus the German-run Buchenwald is probably substantially higher than Suvorov's estimates.

Russian estimates show a total of 122,671 Germans passed through Soviet-run camps in the Soviet Zone after the end of the war. Of this total, 42,889 Germans died, or approximately 35%. The official Soviet statistics probably underestimate the true number of dead in the Soviet-run camps. American military intelligence units and Social Democratic Party groups in the late 1940s and 1950s estimate that a much higher total of 240,000 German prisoners passed through Soviet-run camps. Of these, an estimated 95,643 died, or almost 40%.

In these revisions there were 60,000 prisoners at Sachsenhausen, where 26,143 died; 30,600 prisoners at Buchenwald, where 13,200 did not survive; and 30,000 prisoners at Bautzen, where 16,700 died. These higher death counts are supported by discoveries of numerous mass graves of Germans buried near the Soviet-run camps.<sup>[9]</sup>

No one has ever been punished for the deaths and mistreatment of German inmates in the postwar Soviet-run camps. The hundreds of thousands of visitors who visit the Buchenwald campsite each year only see museums and memorials dedicated to the "victims of fascism." There is nothing at Buchenwald to remind visitors of the thousands of Germans who perished miserably in Buchenwald after the war when the camp was run by the Soviet Union.<sup>[10]</sup>

### **Polish-Run Camps**

Many of the Germans in Poland were also sent to former German concentration camps. In March 1945, the Polish military command declared that the entire German people shared the blame for starting World War II. Over 105,000 Germans were sent to labor camps in Poland before their expulsion from Poland. The Polish authorities soon converted concentration camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Łambinowice (called Lamsdorf by its German occupants) and others into internment and labor camps. In fact, the liberation of the last Jewish inmates at the Auschwitz main camp and the arrival of the first ethnic Germans to Auschwitz were separated by less than two weeks.

When the camps in Poland were finally closed, it is estimated that as many as 50% of the German inmates, mostly women and children, had died from ill-treatment, malnutrition and diseases.<sup>[11]</sup>

In a confidential report concerning the Polish concentration camps filed with the Foreign Office, R.W.F. Bashford wrote: "[T]he concentration camps were not dismantled, but rather taken over by new owners. Mostly they are run by Polish militia. In Świętochłowice, prisoners who are not starved or whipped to death are made to stand, night after night, in cold water up to their necks, until they perish. In Breslau there are cellars from which, day and night, the screams of victims can be heard."<sup>[12]</sup>

Lamsdorf in Upper Silesia was initially built by Germany to house Allied prisoners of war. This camp's postwar population of 8,064 Germans was decimated through starvation, disease, hard labor and physical mistreatment. A surviving German doctor at Lamsdorf recorded the deaths of 6,488 German inmates in the camp after the war, including 628 children.<sup>[13]</sup>

A report submitted to the U.S. Senate dated August 28, 1945 reads: "In "Y" [code for a camp, from the original document], Upper Silesia, an evacuation camp has been prepared which holds at present 1,000 people....A great part of the people are suffering from symptoms of starvation; there are cases of tuberculosis and always new cases of typhoid....Two people seriously ill with syphilis have been dealt with in a very simple way: They were shot....Yesterday a woman from "K" [another camp] was shot and a child wounded." [14]

Zgoda, which had been a satellite camp of Auschwitz during the war, was reopened by the Polish Security Service as a punishment and labor camp. Thousands of Germans in Poland were arrested and sent to Zgoda for labor duties. The prisoners were denied adequate food and medical care, the overcrowded barrack buildings were crawling with lice, and beatings were a common occurrence. The camp director, Salomon Morel, told the prisoners at the gate that he would show them what Auschwitz had meant. A man named Günther Wollny, who had the misfortune of being an inmate in both Auschwitz and Zgoda, later stated, "I'd rather be 10 years in a German camp than one day in a Polish one." [15]

### **Sexual Assaults in Polish Camps**

A notable element of the postwar Polish camp system was the prevalence of sexual assault as well as ritualized sexual humiliation and punishment suffered by the female inmates. The practice at Jaworzno, as reported by Antoni Bialecki of the local Office of Public Security, was to "take ethnically German women at gunpoint home at night and rape them." The camp functioned as a sexual supermarket for its 170-strong militia guard contingent.

The sexual humiliation of female prisoners in the Polish camp at Potulice had become an institutional practice by the end of 1945. Many of the women were sexually abused and beaten, and some of the punishments resulted in horrific injuries. The sexual exploitation of women in Polish-run camps contrasts to the experience of women in German-run concentration camps. Rape or other forms of sexual mistreatment was an extremely rare occurrence at German concentration camps, and severely punished by the authorities if detected. [16]

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) attempted to send a delegation to investigate the atrocities reported in the Polish camps. It was not until July 17, 1947, when most Germans had either died or had been expelled from the camps, that ICRC officials were finally allowed to inspect a Polish camp. Yet even at this late date there were still a few camps the ICRC was not allowed to investigate. [17]

Jewish journalist John Sack has confirmed the torture, murder and sexual assaults of German prisoners in postwar Polish camps operated by the Office of State Security. Most of the camps were staffed and run by Jews, with help from Poles, Czechs, Russians and concentration-camp survivors. Virtually all of the personnel at these camps were eager to take revenge on the defeated Germans. In three years after the war, Sack estimates that from 60,000 to 80,000 Germans died in the Office's camps. [18]

Efforts to bring perpetrators in Polish camps to justice were largely unsuccessful. Czesław Gęborski, director of the camp at Lamsdorf, was indicted by the Polish authorities in 1956 for wanton brutality against the German prisoners. Gęborski admitted at his trial that his only goal in taking the job was "to exact revenge" on the Germans. On October 4, 1945, Gęborski ordered his guards to shoot down

anyone trying to escape a fire that engulfed one of the barracks buildings; a minimum of 48 prisoners were killed that day. The guards at Lamsdorf also routinely beat the German prisoners and stole from them. German prisoners in Lamsdorf died of hunger and diseases in droves; guards recalled scenes of children begging for scraps of food and crusts of bread. Gęborski was found not guilty despite strong evidence of his criminal acts.[\[19\]](#)

### **Czech-Run Camps**

The Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia was used by Germany during the war to intern many of Germany's, Austria's and Czechoslovakia's most-famous or -talented Jews. On May 24, 1945, the Czech government decided to use the Theresienstadt Camp to imprison 600 Germans from Prague. Within the first few hours of their arrival, between 59 and 70 of these Germans were brutally beaten to death. Two hundred more Germans were reported to have died from torture and beatings within the next few days. The camp commandant, Alois Pruša, took great pleasure in the beatings, and reportedly used at least one of his daughters to assist him in killing the German inmates. Pruša and his assistant told the remaining surviving Germans that they would never leave the camp.[\[20\]](#)

Torture appears to have been the rule in Czech-run Theresienstadt. Guards at Theresienstadt used a variety of instruments for beating and lashing their victims: steel rods sheathed with leather, pipes, rubber truncheons, iron bars and wooden planks. One woman in Theresienstadt observed and still remembers the screams from a female SS member forced to sit astride an SA dagger. Dr. E. Siegel, a Czech-speaking medical doctor working for the ICRC, was also subjected to extensive torture in Theresienstadt. Dr. Siegel thought the guards were ordered from above to commit their acts of torture, because the methods used in all Czech-run camps were broadly similar.[\[21\]](#)

Some of the savagery at Theresienstadt stopped when Pruša was replaced by a Maj. Kálal.[\[22\]](#) However, one secret Soviet report said that the German inmates at Theresienstadt repeatedly begged the Russians to stay at the camp. The report states: "We now see the manifestations of hatred for the Germans. They [the Czechs] don't kill them, but torment them like livestock. The Czechs look at them like cattle." The horrible treatment at the hands of the Czechs led to despair and hopelessness among Czechoslovakia's ethnic Germans. According to Czech statistics, 5,558 ethnic Germans committed suicide in 1946 alone.[\[23\]](#)

Czech author Dr. Hans Guenther Adler, a Jew who was imprisoned during the war in Theresienstadt, confirmed that conditions in Czech-run Theresienstadt were deplorable for Germans. Adler wrote:

*Certainly there were those among them who, during the years of occupation, were guilty of some infraction or other, but the majority, among them children and adolescents, were locked up simply because they were German. Just because they were German...? That phrase is frighteningly familiar; one could easily substitute the word "Jew" for "German." The rags given to the Germans as clothes were smeared with swastikas. They were miserably undernourished, abused....The camp was run by Czechs, yet they did nothing to stop the Russians from going in to rape the captive women....[\[24\]](#)*

After the war, the ICRC reported that the sexual abuse of female inmates in Czech-run camps was pervasive and systematic. A foreign observer of one Czech camp noted that the women were "treated like animals. Russian and Czech soldiers come in search of women for purposes which can be imagined. Conditions there for women are definitely more unfavorable than in the German concentration camps,

where cases of rape were rare.” In another Czech-run camp, the soldiers would “take away the prettiest girls, who would often disappear without trace.”

Jean Duchosal, secretary general of the ICRC, reported that girls were often raped at the Matejovce Camp in Slovakia, and that beatings were daily occurrences. The same was true of the Czech-run camp of Patrónka. A Prague police report of June 1945 mentioned that Revolutionary Guards were in the habit of “exposing women’s body parts and burning them with lighted cigarettes.”[\[25\]](#)

A common feature of most Czech-run camps was the provision of so little food as to make not merely malnutrition but actual starvation largely a function of the length of incarceration. The Czech government in 1945 and 1946 instituted a policy that there would be no improvement in the food rations provided to ethnic German inmates regardless of the availability of food. For example, despite the fact that malnutrition-related deaths were occurring at a rate of three per day, none of the 4.5 tons of food the ICRC delivered to the Hagibor camp shortly before Christmas 1945 was issued to the inmates. Richard Stokes, the prominent British Parliament member, visited Hagibor in September 1946 and calculated the daily food ration at Hagibor to be “750 calories per day, which is below Belsen level.”[\[26\]](#)

The ICRC found that published regulations regarding the dietary requirements of inmates in Czech-run camps were almost invariably ignored. Pierre W. Mock, head of the ICRC delegation in Bratislava, calculated the daily caloric intake of prisoners at Petržalka I Camp at 664 per person during the third week of October 1945. The daily caloric intake had declined to 512 per person when Mock returned to the Petržalka I Camp in the last week of December 1945. At Nováky, a former German concentration camp, Mock found the milk and bread ration to be woefully inadequate to feed the population of more than 5,000.

An ICRC visitor at the Hradištko camp near Prague was informed by the guard in charge of food distribution that the inadequate food ration issued to the inmates was fixed by law and unchangeable. The guard also told the ICRC visitor that the few Czech children at Hradištko received twice as much food as the German inmates. A social worker attempting to ameliorate the worst elements of the Czechoslovak camp system confidentially advised the British Foreign Office that the Czech government would not permit relief supplies to be distributed to the needy German civilian inmates.[\[27\]](#)

German prisoners at Svidník camp in Czechoslovakia were also forced to clear away mine fields. Strong protests from the ICRC at Bratislava eventually succeeded in having this practice stopped.[\[28\]](#) The ICRC sent a general memorandum to the Prague government on March 14, 1946, stating that its duty was to carry out the German expulsions as humanely as possible. In view of the unsatisfactory condition of the Czech-run camps, the ICRC recommended that provisional internment of Germans in Czechoslovakia end as soon as possible.[\[29\]](#)

## **Conclusion**

The German prisoners in postwar Soviet, Polish and Czech concentration camps were subject to brutal treatment resulting in the loss of many tens of thousands of lives. Their treatment was probably worse than the treatment of prisoners in German-run concentration camps during World War II.

## **Endnotes**

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- [2] Suvorov, Viktor, *The Chief Culprit: Stalin's Grand Design to Start World War II*, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2008, p. 279.
- [3] Naimark, Norman M., *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 377.
- [4] Weber, Mark, "Extermination Camps Propaganda Myths," in Gauss, Ernst (ed.), *Dissecting the Holocaust: The Growing Critique of Truth and Memory*, Capshaw, Ala.: Theses and Dissertations Press, 2000, p. 299.
- [5] *Ibid.*
- [6] Suvorov, Viktor, op. cit., p. 279.
- [7] Weber, Mark op. cit., p. 299.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 298.
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- [11] Merten, Ulrich, *Forgotten Voices: The Expulsion of the Germans from Eastern Europe after World War II*, New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2012, pp. 9, 65.
- [12] Public Record Office, FO 371/46990.
- [13] De Zayas, Alfred-Maurice, *Nemesis at Potsdam: The Anglo-Americans and the Expulsion of the Germans*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977, pp. 125-126.
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- [15] Lowe, Keith, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012, pp. 135-137.
- [16] Douglas, R. M, op. cit., pp. 141-142.
- [17] International Committee of the Red Cross, *Report of its Activities during the Second World War*, Geneva: 1948, Vol. 1, pp. 334 et seq.
- [18] Sack, John, *An Eye for an Eye*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, New York: Basic Books, 2000, p. 114.
- [19] Naimark, Norman M., *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 130.
- [20] MacDonogh, Giles, *After the Reich: The Brutal History of the Allied Occupation*, New York: Basic Books, 2007, pp. 153-154.

[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 157.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 156.

[23] Naimark, Norman M., , 2001, op. cit., p. 118.

[24] De Zayas, Alfred-Maurice, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 97.

[25] Douglas, R. M., op. cit., pp. 141-142.

[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 144, 151-152.

[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 144, 146.

[28] International Committee of the Red Cross, Reports of Its Activities during the Second World War, Geneva: 1948, Vol. 1, pp. 334, 675f.

[29] De Zayas, Alfred-Maurice, , 1977op. cit., p. 125.

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